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Some thoughts on eugenics and education

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SOME THOUGHTS ON EUGENICS AND EDUCATION

BY

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If I were asked what is the most vital factor in the bringing up of a child I should say a devoted, well-bred, intelligent mother. Failing in this from any cause, a nursery governess, who, if not also a mother, has the above qualifications.

It is, of course, an advantage to have at the same time a well-bred father, for a boy, at least, will be sure as he grows older to imitate as far as possible the man with whom he is most familiar. But, nevertheless, the mother is, or should be, the one constantly in touch with the baby and the child up to its eighth year of age. This is the all-important period in which children are most plastic or impressionable. Furthermore, the earlier in the history of the child's career it is encouraged by the mother to confide in her implicitly, the better its prospects of an escape from outside, ill-advised, if not ill-disposed influences.

When the facts of inheritance and environment become more widely understood in their modern technical acceptation, this

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early period of plasticity will have achieved an importance second only to the producing thru suitable parentage of potential, tractable, teachable offspring. That we do not inherit the acquired characters of our parents is now established beyond peradventure. We simply inherit the same protoplasmic potentialities which they inherited, and, contrary to popular belief, none of their acquirements. Each new generation is a mechanical mixture but not a fused compound, so to speak, of the two preceding parental germ plasms which have united for reproduction.

Children inherit the innate capacity of their parents, sometimes exclusively from one side, sometimes from the other, and, then again, but always in a complex rather than a blended status, from both sides. What is more, certain traits may arise in a child that have lain dormant in the parents but which are handed on by them from near or even remote grandparents. This last feature of transmission accounts for the often-decided difference in character of children from their parents as well as between themselves. To be sure, their individual experiences even in the same family, a fact not always taken into consideration, are never exactly alike, and, hence, another tho lesser reason for marked individuality.

Children are capable of development to the extent of their inherent capacity, and practically no further. Neglect of training and education, with, meantime, adverse in-

fluences, may be the cause of a woeful misdirection of capabilities, but without these inherent aptitudes little, under the most favorable conditions, can be accomplished. There is more truth than poetry in the old saying, "You cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Perhaps the best illustration of the interdependence of heredity and environment is shown by what would happen to a child born of highly civilized parentage, with many strong inherent capabilities, but brought up, let us suppose, thru a fortuitous happening from infancy by and among a tribe of wild Indians. He might become a leader among them and excel in whatever related to the prevailing customs of these savages, but his excellence would not and could not transcend the bounds of an observation and experience thus circumscribed. We are familiar with the adage that, "Blood will tell." It may tell a direful tale if not directed into proper channels, as it were, early in the history of its circulation.

The only rational prospect of improving the human race as a race, in contradistinction to the passing individual, depends solely upon the intelligent carrying out of the teachings of heredity, variation, and evolution, and in particular of a special subdivision of these teachings known as the "Science of Eugenics" which relates to the union of a wisely selected father and mother for the production of well-endowed descend-

ants. In other words, the elimination of bad traits and preservation of good traits by the selection of a suitable parentage for the succeeding generation.

Education and physical training however beneficial to the individual have no influence directly upon enduring racial improvement. Just as progress, tho in well-defined limits, takes place among domestic animals by a prescribed selection or breeding, so in the human species, the limits of whose advance, however, cannot be foretold, it must take place by well-considered heredity or artificial selection. Physically man has probably reached the boundary of his requirements. What evolution properly directed will do for him mentally is a problem yet undetermined.

The belief in maternal impressions, so-called, still held by a number of otherwise intelligent persons is but a coinage of the brain of the scientifically uninformed. Maternal influences upon the unborn child are strictly confined to its health and nutrition. Thereafter, when the child has become a sentient being maternal impressions are of the strongest and of the greatest consequence.

Schopenhauer says: "Love is the supreme will to live, the genius of the species, and nature, being highly strategic, covers itself, for the fulfillment of its aims, with a mask of objective admiration, and deludes the individual so cleverly therewith, that he takes

that to be his own happiness, which, in reality, is but the maintenance of the species." The poetical loss of vision termed "blindness of love" in view of present-day knowledge, which makes for a progress, for which there is ample room and material for that matter, if properly utilized, as well as for the preservation of our species, can be restored by the application of a few of the prosaic facts of eugenics to the eyes of those most seriously afflicted.

We inherit that which *our* parents inherited. What we make for ourselves out of this inheritance depends to a considerable extent upon existing opportunities. A certain number, to be sure, are so strongly endowed inherently as to surmount many adverse circumstances. What they become, as a rule, depends upon the degree of their capabilities combined with the nature of their early environment. It seems to me, therefore, that in the case of a motherless child, or one deprived of a mother's proper supervision, in view of this critical period, the employment even at a very considerable pecuniary investment of a woman for a nursery governess as previously described, is worth more in the end to the adult than a great deal of the later and more extensive outlay of money devoted to educational purposes.

Altho the boarding schools of the present day are doubtless vastly superior to many of those of former times, a quite young child

is better off at home under fairly propitious conditions, in my opinion, based on a very considerable experience, for while not necessarily tied to its mother's apron strings, it is still during a greater part of the time under her direct supervision, whereas away at school possibly it may be subject all the time to very serious deleterious influences.

It must be admitted, of course, that it is one thing to theorize about how children should be brought up and quite another to possess for this purpose the necessary tact, patience, and perseverance. Simply a willing heart without wisdom, however, in this direction is not sufficient for the attainment of the ends desired.

While the numbers are manifestly increasing of those who take deep counsel upon these matters, there are yet many parents little qualified for the proper rearing of children.

Unquestionably the most vital requirement of an education is, or has been hitherto, as a rule, sadly neglected. After the first rudiments of learning, children should be taught to know themselves, their anatomy, physiology, the need of personal hygiene, and some of the pathogenic dangers by which they are and will be encompassed. Thus upon approaching maturity they will have escaped the vast majority of besetting dangers, and with the now added knowledge of the vital questions of eugenics they will find themselves, in turn, properly equipped for one

of the most sacred duties of mankind, which is the bringing into the world of physically and mentally well-endowed offspring, and bringing them up to be worthy of their inheritance. What would be thought, for example, of selecting a pilot to guide a ship safely upon its voyage to sea who was ignorant of the rocks, and shoals, and deviations of the channel leading thitherward.

It is unfortunate that more parents do not grasp the idea that ignorance in children of the things that are wrong, and otherwise objectionable, is not the necessary equivalent of what correctly defined is innocence. A child had best be taught at the proper age to know itself and the various dangers to which it may be exposed. Its innocence then will consist in avoiding what is dangerous, and not giving way to what it well knows is wrongdoing. In times past it was more a matter of good luck than good management that so many youths and maids grew up to maturity and led creditable lives. That a certain number of children grow up and go astray in spite of careful training may not be, it is true, so much the fault of the parents, or even the young people for that matter, as it is of the reappearance of a possibly long dormant bad streak of inheritance. Nevertheless, when we consider how many young men and women are launched into the world in total ignorance of much of it and of themselves, under a delusion that this is innocence, the wonder

is not how great but how small is the consequent wreckage. "The actions we call sinful are as much the consequence of the order of Nature as those we call virtuous. They are part and parcel of the struggle for existence thru which all living things have passed, and they have become sins because man alone seeks a higher life in voluntary association."

A child's education and discipline should begin in the very arms of its nurse or at least in the cradle. It is the failure to appreciate this at that momentous period which accounts for a great deal of its possible later waywardness. It is well to know, however, and remember that children pass more or less rapidly thru the precivilized phases of the history of our race in their journey up to maturity, and the occasional outcroppings, especially among boys, of the instincts of our barbaric if not savage forefathers, in the way of saying that which is not true, doing that which is most cruel, and the taking of what does not belong to them, are in the quite young, at worst, but venial offenses, and, as a rule, easily eradicated, and not necessarily an evidence of total depravity. Moreover, such bad habits may have been acquired from some less favored and slightly older companion rather than thru any innateness, for imitation is strong in children, stronger indeed than is commonly realized, whereas these primitive instincts, except when the inherent protoplasm is especially defective, have been to a very considerable extent extinguished. "Moral duty consists in the observance of those rules of conduct which constitute the welfare of society, and by implication, of the individuals who comprise it. As to whether we can all fulfill the moral law, I should say hardly any of us. Some of us are utterly incapable of fulfilling its plainest dictates. As there are men born physically cripples and intellectually idiots, so there are some who are moral cripples and idiots, and can be kept straight not even by punishment. For those people there is nothing but shutting up, or extermination."

The abiding instinct in all children for play is a wise provision of Nature, and should not only not be repressed but always encouraged for it is a most important factor in both mental and physical development.

There is nothing so inexpensive and accessible, better qualified to familiarize children with the old, as well as modern masters, than the artistic Seemann prints in color of the paintings in the various European galleries, and now that the radio has come into general use the best music of the world is at the disposal of nearly everybody, and it serves a very useful purpose in giving children an early opportunity to become acquainted with a high order of musical composition. If there is anything inborn to react to artistic or to musical influences this early experience will further its develop-

ment. And even if there is no inherent ability in this direction still there will be an intellectual advantage in being well informed musically and artistically.

To administer corporeal punishment to a child is, according to my theory of life, simply an indignity; it is taking an unfair advantage of helplessness; it is a rank confession on the part of the parents or guardians, in most instances, of early neglect in training the child, and therefore of incompetency.

Children should be given weekly or monthly a small allowance of spending money suitable to their age and circumstances, and thus taught in the beginning how to use it with economy and discretion. This will ensure a reasonable feeling of obligation as well as independence, for it is almost as injurious to confine a boy's or a girl's power of getting this necessary medium of exchange to the ofttimes caprice of the parents as to shower upon them a supply of ready money out of all proportion to their age and requirements. But once having settled upon what is thought essential, the living up strictly on both sides to the arrangement is the only way that a child can obtain any material benefit from this early monetary experience, since in the management of children and their affairs the most disastrous of all things is inconsistency.

The child as it grows up and away from the immediate care of its mother, who is

taken into intimate friendly relations by the father, instead of held in awe, or at a distance, is much less likely to be led astray by outside deleterious associates. The highest morality to teach a child, it seems to me, is that he or she shall do right because it is wrong to do otherwise, and for no hope of reward or fear of punishment.

When a man finds on subsequent reflection that he has taken the right course almost instinctively under the sudden pressure of an emergency, let him thank his progenitors, and, incidentally, his mother in particular, who early helped to develop his best inherent potentialities.

It would be a step in advance in the education of children if a candid history were kept of the salient points, good and bad, of each generation of a family, at least for home consumption. Let this be consulted by the teacher to whom the child's education is entrusted. Careful study of the child with these facts in mind would enable the teacher to correct to some extent certain existing deficiencies, and, furthermore, thus early to discover in what direction it was best worth while to encourage development.

It is much wiser to induce children to think and reason for themselves, to draw them out, as it were, than to fill them up with a mass of useless material, which even if swallowed may never be digested or assimilated. "People never will recollect," says Huxley, "that mere learning and mere

cleverness are of next to no value in life, while energy and intellectual grasp, the things that are inborn and cannot be taught, are everything."

Inasmuch as perfect health is the mainspring of happiness, let a child's training be physical as well as mental, but never the former at the expense of his mentality.

The question is sometimes raised as to whether or not it is really worth while to send a boy to college who is not studiously inclined. There is certainly one positive advantage, where the expense is not a matter of serious consideration, namely, he will at least learn how little he actually knows, and moreover possibly acquire an ideal of attainment towards which in after years he may yet seriously strive, upon coming to a realizing sense of his deficiencies. Meantime, still further, he will have attained a certain modesty of demeanor that he might not otherwise possess towards things and persons intellectual.

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